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# Educational Journey of a Muslim Woman Educationist: Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908–1964)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper traces the educational journey, professional life, and legacy of Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud (c.1908–1964), a pioneering Bengali Muslim writer, teacher, social worker and parliamentarian whose life bridged the late colonial and early post-partition decades in Bengal/East Pakistan. Using primary biographical references and scholarly syntheses, the paper situates Mahmud within the broader movement for Muslim women's education, documents her pedagogical and literary contributions, and assesses her long-term legacy for women's educational infrastructure and public life in Bangladesh.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed important changes in Muslim women's education in Bengal. Against entrenched social constraints (strict purdah, early marriage, limited access to institutional schooling), a small but influential cohort of Muslim women embraced formal education and turned to teaching, writing and social reform. Shamsunnahar Mahmud stands out among these figures: raised in a relatively progressive household, she became an educator, author of children's and biographical works, and later a public leader who carried the cause of women's education into political and social institutions. This paper asks: How did Mahmud's educational experiences shape her professional commitments? What concrete contributions did she make to women's education and social welfare? And how has her memory been institutionalized?

### Methodology:

This is a historical-biographical study that synthesizes reputable encyclopedia entries, university archives, contemporary press and academic discussions about Muslim women's educational history in Bengal. Key sources include the Banglapedia entry on Shamsunnahar Mahmud, university materials (University of Dhaka), scholarly works on Muslim women in colonial Bengal, and primary lists of her writings and institutional affiliations. Where possible, corroborating details were drawn from multiple independent sources to ensure reliability.

### Early Life and Social Context

Shamsunnahar Mahmud was born in 1908 at Guthuma (now in Feni District). She belonged to an educated, relatively progressive Muslim family: her father Mohammad Nurullah served as a munsiff and her brother Habibullah Bahar Chowdhury was politically active. This familial milieu - with access to formal schooling and intellectual culture - shaped her early possibilities at a time when most Muslim girls in rural Bengal had little access to institutional education. The broader context was a complex interplay of social reformers (like Begum Rokeya), new Muslim middle-class aspirations, and rising debates about women's roles.

### Formal Education and Training

Mahmud began schooling at Dr. Khastagir Government Girls' High School (Chittagong),

matriculating in 1926 as a private candidate, proceeded to receive I.A. (1928) and B.A. (1932) from Diocesan College, Calcutta, and completed an M.A. in Bengali literature in 1942. Her advanced study in Bengali literature reflected both personal literary interests and the growing acceptance-within certain urban/progressive circles-of women studying the humanities and entering teaching professions. The fact of an M.A. in Bengali at that time is notable: it placed her among a slender cohort of Muslim women with postgraduate credentials in language and literature.

**Career in Education and Literary Work**

After completing her studies, Mahmud joined Lady Brabourne College (Calcutta) as a teacher of Bengali literature - an important post in a leading women's college. She edited women's sections of periodicals (e.g., Nauroj, Atmashakti) and co-edited the magazine Bulbul with her brother; she also produced children's literature and biographies, most notably writing Rokeya Jibani (1937), the first biography of Begum Rokeya, thereby participating in shaping public memory of earlier women's rights pioneers. Her work in children's education (books like Shishur Shiksa) indicates a pedagogical focus that combined curricular concerns with broader reformist aims-nurturing the next generation through accessible, culturally rooted educational material.

**Social Work, Women's Organizing and International Engagement**

Mahmud served as secretary to the Nikhil Banga Muslim Mahila Samity (All-Bengal Muslim Women's Society), aligning her with organizational efforts to improve female education and social welfare among Muslims. In the 1950s she represented East Pakistan on international platforms (a 1952 visit to Turkey and the Middle East is recorded), and engaged with international women's networks. In 1961 she initiated the Centre for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Children - demonstrating a widening of her social remit beyond formal schooling to child welfare and rehabilitation. These activities show how an educationist's role can expand into institutional social provision and diplomatic representation.

**Political Role and Advocacy**

In 1962 Mahmud was elected as a member of the 3rd National Assembly (representing a women's reserved seat). Holding a legislative platform allowed her to advocate for women's interests at the national level - a trajectory not uncommon for progressive educationists of the period who used political office to institutionalize reforms begun in schools and voluntary organizations. Her political engagement capped a career that connected pedagogy, publishing, social organization, and formal policymaking.

**Legacy: Institutions, Honors and Memory**

Mahmud's long-term legacy is visible in both symbolic and material forms. The women's halls at the University of Dhaka and University of Chittagong bear her name (Shamsun Nahar Hall), anchoring her memory in the everyday life of female university students. She was posthumously awarded the Independence Day Award (Bangladesh) in 1981 in recognition of her social work. Her writings-especially the biography of Begum Rokeya-remain reference points in historiography of Muslim women's emancipation in Bengal. The issuance of a commemorative postage stamp (centenary) also speaks to her continued presence in national memory.

**Discussion:**

**Mahmud's Educational Philosophy and Impact**

From her published work and institutional choices, some themes about Mahmud's educational outlook emerge:

1. Cultural rootedness - She wrote in Bengali and focused on child education anchored in local language and sensibility, resisting any notion that modern education must be culturally alien.
2. Practical reformism - Her career linked classroom teaching, children's literature, women's organizational work, rehabilitation for disabled children and parliamentary advocacy - showing an orientation toward pragmatic, institution-building reform.
3. Role modelling - By occupying public offices and scholarly positions, she demonstrated vocational pathways for Muslim women into teaching, authorship and public life, contributing to a gradual normalization of women's higher education in East Bengal.

Her impact is less a single radical manifesto and more a cumulative legacy of institutions, published works, and public service that together widened the social acceptability and practical infrastructure for women's education.

**Conclusion:**

Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmud's life illustrates how an individual educationist can operate across multiple arenas - classroom, periodical literature, social organizations and legislative politics - to advance women's education. Rooted in a progressive family and armed with advanced formal education, she translated private attainment into public goods: teaching posts, children's books, women's organizational leadership, welfare initiatives and

legislative representation. Her commemoration through university halls, awards and continued citation in histories of women's education confirm a durable legacy. For scholars of gender and education in South Asia, Mahmud offers a case of how middle-class Muslim women negotiated tradition and modernity to expand schooling opportunities for future generations.

Selected Works by Shamsunnahar Mahmud (extract)

Punyamayi (1925)

Phulbagicha (1935)

Begum Mahal (1936)

Rokeya Jibani (1937) - biography of Begum Rokeya.

Shishur Shiksa (1939) - on child education.

Amar Dekha Turaska (1956)

Nazrulke Jeman Dekhechhi (1958).

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